

On Little Deaths and Small Miracles

“The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”- *Joseph Campbell*

So who am I? How can life be a privilege if I can't answer this question?

For the longest time, I lived my life desiring to find the meaning and purpose of my existence. I've been searching for at least five years now, and I haven't found my answers. In fact, I don't know if I'll ever find one. However, I now believe that I may not even need those answers. As the mythologist Joseph Campbell remarked,

“People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That's what it's all finally about.”

This quote, along with much of Joseph Campbell's work in *The Power of Myth*, was a key part of my life's transformation. I'd never thought about life this way before. It sounded so different, and so refreshingly appealing and simple.

This essay will document the trials, tribulations, and the peak experiences of my journey. Apart from aiding me in reflecting on the experiences that made me feel so alive, I sincerely hope that this essay can reach deep into your heart and serve as an inspirational tool in your (the reader's) spiritual journey one day. Not everything will ring true with you, because my path and your path are not the same. The philosopher Kahlil Gibran said, “If [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your

own mind. ... For the vision of one's man lends not its wings to another man." Along these lines, I hope that this essay can, in some capacity, spark your own journey.

Now, I have to make a choice. I can lament and vent about how difficult and frustrating this quest for spiritual fulfillment has been, or I can choose to write with hope and appreciation for what God has given me thus far. My ego lures me to the first option, but I am going to go with the latter option, because life is more than about having things the Pete way. I've asked 'Why me?' countless times. I used to wonder why I'm suffering so much. I used to wonder why I can't just be a 'normal' college student who parties most weekends and worries about life later. I used to wonder why I can't just be happy. That's all I ever wanted.

Life has changed. I've come to realize that all the suffering that I experienced really helped put me in touch with reality and who I am. In life, we all experience many 'little deaths', the moments of extreme shock or suffering when the world seems to collapse and shows no mercy. They are those dark moments when we question whether this life has been a waste, or whether it's worth living. Most of the time, we always emerge from these little deaths with a refreshed mental state and renewed vigor. We manage to see the world in a different light. It is as if we slowly learn how to appreciate the world without our own biases and judgment. Small miracles befall us after our little deaths and make the world look so much brighter and more alive. Sometimes, the little deaths themselves are the miracles of life. These moments are God's displays of his creativity and the genius of his creation – our lives.

You may have squirmed at my use of the word 'God.' Many of you know me as a Buddhist who used to dislike Christianity. Indeed, I struggled greatly with the fact that many Christians believe I will go to Hell. Many friends told me, 'Oh, just don't think about it. It

doesn't really do you any good.' That's very true, but it bothered me nonetheless. I couldn't take my mind off the issue, not until I heard Joseph Campbell said this:

“Every religion is true one way or another. It is true when understood metaphorically. But when it gets stuck in its own metaphors, interpreting them as facts, then you are in trouble.”

As I continue to read the thoughts and stories of respected spiritual seekers and writers, I have found that all of them, without fail, convey this same message, albeit disguised in different forms. Here are some examples:

Dalai Lama: If I believe that Buddhism is best for everyone, that would be foolish, because different people have different mental dispositions. So, the variety of people calls for a variety of religions. ... I think we can learn to celebrate that diversity in religions and develop a deep appreciation of the variety of religions. ... They are all designed to make the individual a happier person, and the world a better place.

Eckhart Tolle: All religions are equally false and equally true.

Ken Wilber: Attunement could occur through any of the great religions, but would be tied exclusively to none of them. A person could be attuned to an "integral spirituality" while still be a practicing Christian, Buddhist, New-Age advocate, or Neopagan. This would be something added to one's religion, not subtracted from it. The only thing it would subtract (and there's no way around this) is the belief that one's own path is the only true path to salvation.

It dawned upon me that if I stop judging religious texts as facts or lies, and instead interpret them as metaphors of a Higher Truth, life makes sense. It not only makes sense from a cognitive approach; I can almost *feel* the Truth. I can almost feel the world's interconnectedness, unity and energy. I can almost feel the invisible life force in all of us – the life force that I now call God. So when I mention God, I am referring to the God that resides within each of us, the

God that is full of peace and happiness. So you can choose to call it God, Buddha, energy, spirit, soul, or whatever. The meaning is still the same; it transcends the label.

It is amazing how far I've come from the point in time when I avoided any association to 'God' (then strictly referring to the Christian God to me) to this point when I am comfortable with the newfound connotation of the word. The world really seems so much more open and free this way. So regardless of whether you subscribe to a religion, I believe that it is in your best interest to remain fully open and aware of the limitless possibilities that the world presents.

I've stopped 'labeling' myself as a Buddhist, and it was very liberating for me to do so. In fact, I'm not a big fan of labels or stereotypes that are imposed on us either by ourselves or by society. In this physical world, I can be classified as an Asian, a male, an engineering student, an introvert, and a spiritual man, among others. But what are all these labels for? I think life can be so much more peaceful if we all can disregard not only the physical appearance but our preconceived judgments as well. No human being is superior to another, despite having different wealth, fame, or friendships. Deep inside, we have the same goal of finding happiness and peace. We all share this fact: there is God within. Why is it so hard to look past our differences and focus on our shared fate as fellow beings in this world?

I believe the answer is our ego.

I don't even know what the ego is exactly. All I know is that it exists in each of us. As commonly described, the ego creates an illusion and tricks us into believing that time and space are real, and that each of us has to fight to continue its existence, rendering us unaware of the God and peace that lies in the depth of our souls. The path towards spiritual awakening begins with being aware of the ego and slowly chipping away at its control. In my own life, the ego has

accompanied me for as long as I can remember, and it is not until last week that I gained some awareness of its existence.

Why does the ego exist? Why is there this apparent duality between the ego and consciousness? Why can't we all easily connect with God? I don't have any answers to these questions. These questions haunted me for some time. I became increasingly frustrated as my attachment to these questions grew, but they have done nothing but slowed me down in my spiritual path. Perhaps, too many questions and too much doubt may indeed hinder one's peace and happiness in this world. Hermann Hesse wrote in *Siddhartha*, "I suffer from thirst ... and my thirst has not lessened on this long samana path I have always thirsted for knowledge, I have always been full of questions. ... And I am starting to believe that this knowledge has no worse enemy than the wish to know, than learning."

That is a thought-provoking statement, is it not? I used to ask numerous questions. I used to be unaware of my spirituality. I used to be ignorant of many things. Now, I try to focus less on questions, and more on my own journey. Where will it take me? Who knows. Where do I want to go now? Towards peace, and towards God. Whatever happens, I think it's best to smile, knowing that you're alive.

Perhaps it is time to narrate my life story, because life hasn't always been this way. There is still great ambiguity and uncertainty, but I went through some phases in life that I think many of you may identify with. I think my life is a remarkable testament to a man's ability to overcome hardships, transform and embark on the spiritual journey. I say this not with arrogance, for I am aware of many fellow beings who have overcome far more troubling obstacles and have awakened. I say this with hope that I can convince you that all things are

possible. After all, we are interconnected, and our lives are interwoven even if we haven't met. We exist in each other.

I was born and raised in Bangkok, Thailand amidst the prevalent Asian culture focused on academic, monetary and career success. From youth I was trained to be very competitive, work extremely hard and care about not much else other than school. I was also blessed with the intelligence to start off with. Life worked out for a while. I did extremely well in school. My parents were proud. I even won a scholarship to attend a prestigious high school in Singapore.

My experience in Singapore gave the word competitive a whole new meaning. Life in Singapore moved so much more quickly, and everyone was fending for themselves. As Singapore was trying to prove to the world that they matter despite their being a 'little red dot' on the world's map, the Singaporean media and government heavily popularized and reinforced the emphasis on academic and financial success. Furthermore, as a scholar, I faced the societal expectation that I should perform better than most students in the school. These two factors combined to heighten the pressure to be extremely achievement-oriented. Surprisingly or otherwise, I thrived in the system, but there was no happiness.

I soon started questioning my purpose in life. Was I there just to get good grades and do well in school? Life felt incomplete. I didn't feel connected with life. It was at this point that I started blogging seriously about my life and happiness. Although my lifestyle didn't change much, this was a momentous stage in my life; my spirituality started to germinate.

After I graduated from high school, I decided to get ordained as a novice monk in a forest temple in Thailand. I did it partially because it was good karma for my parents, but I also thought it was time that I summoned my courage to try a different lifestyle. So there I was, living an

ascetic life, praying twice daily, meditating throughout the day, and eating only once a day. I lived away from the distraction of my cell phone, laptop and Facebook and tried to stay present with every thought and action.

I only lasted two weeks, but it was a tremendous experience. It was like another realm of life altogether. I could feel how I may find peace if I continue down the ascetic path, but I didn't feel I was ready to commit to this path. It just didn't feel right then. Nonetheless, I did emerge with a slightly clearer understanding of Buddhism, and I was determined to make sure that I abide by Buddhist principles.

That didn't happen. It was as if I got sucked back into the world – into the distractions, expectations, and illusion. I caved in to what society expects of me again. It was as if I never left.

So I came to Michigan carrying the typical gene for 'success' – both the talent and diligence to get as high a GPA as possible, build an impressive resume, and find the most prestigious internships possible. I also wanted to get a master's degree, do a minor and stay involved with many clubs and be a part of the executive board of at least one – all this in four and a half years. That was the dream then. I was excited.

A year later, at the very same spot, the dream lost its appeal. Life was interspersed with periods of unease, apprehension and emptiness. A good GPA and an impressive resume did not give me meaning. Life was still incomplete. In fact, it wasn't just incomplete; it was miserable. I was fed up with the one-dimensional approach of continually working for 'a bright future'. When I looked at the world, I saw possibilities - possibilities that had drifted along, possibilities that I'd never quite pursued.

I realized that the ‘dream’ that I was going after wasn’t really my dream. It was a dream fueled by societal values, not my own. It’s all about being extremely competitive, pursuing the academic and career success, and impressing the world with my credentials. Having given in to the societal ideals for so long that it’s practically second nature, I spent sleepless nights worrying about the depressing future that I will have. I thought about Buddhism and my experience at the temple. That moment was definitely more peaceful than this one, but it was just impossible to let everything go. Furthermore, it’s going to take me forever to reach enlightenment. I don’t have the patience – or the time. I wanted it now! There seemed to be no alternatives. I was stuck in the system. There seemed to be no hope. I was resigning to fate.

Then, LeaderShape happened.

LeaderShape, a leadership training program that encourages participants to be aware of social justice and have ‘a healthy disregard for the impossible,’ helped me organize my passions, visions and values. It helped me think about what I really wanted to do with my life. It made me realize that it is okay to not agree with the prevalent societal values. I can just be who I am, regardless of what everyone else says.

One day, I decided that this was it. I no longer wanted to be the majority. I no longer wanted to be controlled. I wanted to be the master of my own life. So I wrote a letter to Society:

“Dear Society,

For decades, I’ve been subjected to your control; letting you choose what I will do with my life, letting you tell me what success means, letting you turn every damn thing into some sort of competition, letting you make me feel like a failure. You know what. From now, I refuse to be controlled. I refuse to let you choose my path. I will control my own life, and I will not let you ruin my happiness.”

Voila. That was the start of my ‘happiness revolution.’ I started doing things for myself. I tried to obsess less about grades. I stopped worrying so much about my resume. I started opening my eyes to see the world in a new light. I started doing things that are considered ‘useless’ to my academic success - such as reading books like Tal Ben-Shahar’s *Happier* and Eric Weiner’s *Geography of Bliss*. I looked into positive psychology. I started talking to people about life’s purpose and well-being. I listened to TED speeches. I went to talks by great inspirers such as Martin Seligman and Daniel Kahneman. I played more tennis, went on Facebook more and started catching up with old friends. These things were not going to get me ‘A’s on my homework and exams, but they refueled me with the inspiration to move on.

It was then that I realized how much happier I can be without listening to the ever-imposing society. It was amazing how much my life has changed since I chose to see the world in my own terms. However, that was not the end of the story. I got sucked back into the societal system once again.

During my sophomore year, engineering courses were more demanding and expectations were higher. I suddenly found myself, and my friends, working harder than ever on things that we felt were pointless. With talks about internships and careers abound, I started caring about grades again. I started competing again. I felt like I was wasting my life away. I was dispirited. I was lost. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to give up, but this wasn’t the end either.

It looks like God had more in store for me. He gave me a spiritual mentor, who I met during my interview for my summer internship program. He introduced me to Joseph Campbell’s *Power of Myth*, and allowed me to take a class on *Psychology of Spiritual Development*. These

two gifts led me to this current phase in my life, when I am a faithful student of spirituality and an observer of life.

The fascinating thing about my life is that everything that has left a lasting impact on me has this in common: I almost decided not to get involved, or I almost could not do so. I almost did not go to LeaderShape. I almost did not attend the talk by Martin Seligman, who increased my interest in positive psychology. I almost decided not to attend my summer internship interview, and I wouldn't have met my mentor if I didn't do so. I almost did not get to take my psychology course. I chortle every time I think about this; it is as if God always signals to me before he hands me a gift. For this fact, I am truly thankful. This cemented my belief that God really does have a plan for everyone. He always finds me the motivation to keep going. My happiness revolution was no exception.

It turned out that there was a major flaw with my concept of 'happiness.' I was focusing on worldly happiness, derived from mostly external sources. I thought that I could find lasting happiness without thinking about my inner self. However, true bliss and peace can only be achieved when one delves within and connects with God. We can be very passionate about something, but if we are not in tune with the present moment, we attach ourselves with the goal of realizing our passions, and that can lead to suffering.

Now I think we can all seek peace through being aware of our ego and connecting with God. A mentor once told me that everything that happens on the outside is a reflection of the inside. It is true. One may see the world as a chaotic and distracting place if our heart is not at peace, but the chaos may in fact be order on a level that we have yet to comprehend.

So this is where I am right now. Four years ago, I'd never imagined that I'd be where I am today. As I reflect on how my life has twisted and turned, I cannot help but smile. Many times I ask 'Why does this happen to me?' I used to think of life as random fragments being pieced together – some pieces more welcome than others. Now, when I look back, I start to see that everything happened for a reason, even the despondence, sadness, mistakes, and losses. Everything seems to have been planned out perfectly – by God perhaps.

Many people tell me that I'm going to go on and do great things. Many tell me that I'll be rich. Many tell me that I'll find peace one day. I sometimes get annoyed when people say that, because I have absolutely no clue what 'great things' I'm supposed to achieve. I could let my ego take control and get more frustrated that I am nowhere near achieving peace, or even material success. I haven't figured out what I am destined to do. It surely is frustrating at times, but I have to be mindful that I can also approach this from a different angle.

We all want a lot of things in our lives and struggle and complain when we don't get them. I think we don't get them for a reason. I think God knows best about what we really deserve and where we should go. Sometimes, I feel like He has teased me, toyed with me, tested me, played with me, and let me wander around. I think this might be part of His grand plan. Maybe He was teaching me how to be patient. Maybe He was teaching me how to be self-reliant. Maybe He was teaching me how to exercise compassion. Maybe He was teaching me that life doesn't go the way I want it to all the time.

God has a plan for our greatness. I currently don't know what my greatness is, but rather than being preoccupied with this thought, I can focus on being aware of the awe of the present moment. I trust that life will eventually guide me to where I should be. Sometimes, the best

things in life happen when one least expects it. As John Lennon said, “Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.”

When reading Ken Wilber’s *Grace and Grit*, these words stuck out to me: “Let go, and let God.” This phrase has a profound and lasting impact on me. I’ve never seen a more beautifully coined phrase that captures so much truth. We have to learn how to let go of our attachments, and our ego, and let God lead the way. Let go, and let God: so simple, yet so true, and so powerful.

As I continue to read and engage in new conversations, I discover that many kindred souls are hungry for spiritual awakening as well. I used to think that most college students seem happy with their lives. I thought that everyone else was happy and content with studying hard during the week and partying hard during the weekend. It was not until my open sharing session with my *Psychology of Spiritual Development* classmates that I realized I was gravely mistaken. Most of us have experienced great sorrow in our lives. During the sharing session, I recalled judging some of my classmates for not sharing so quickly. Then, after they summoned the courage to be exposed and vulnerable, I was struck by the traumatic and life-threatening experiences that some of them faced. It dawned upon me how easily my ego can take control of me and judge others without even fully understanding who they are. As my heart shared the pain of our existence, I had a revelation. The heart, when alone, is ignorant and bound to the ego. The heart, when exposed, vulnerable, and cognizant, is interconnected to the experiences of those around us. When the heart listens attentively, the world is more than just ‘me,’ and when the heart cries for others, it is actually smiling. It functions collectively with the world.

The heart is a captivating invention. It is through the heart that we are able to appreciate the beauty of music and art. It is the heart that has the capacity to love and be loved. I like to think of the heart as associated with intuition and the female energy, while the brain is associated with cognition and the male power. Unfortunately, our current society has hailed cognition as king and dismisses truths that cannot be cognitively reasoned. Unavoidably, this approach overemphasizes the importance of science and technology. Spirituality and religion struggle to retain their place in the society. It's a shame. Science and technology have led to recent advancements in medicine and industrial output, but spirituality is vital in connecting mankind with our purpose and responsibility in this world. Without the feminine power of the heart, the world's balance is shaken. The yin and the yang are no longer in harmony. I believe this is why we face the widening economic gap, decreased levels of happiness and environmental crisis today. The male-dominated model will not last.

In our search for certainty, we have entrusted our brain to get us answers. Yet, my experience has led me to believe that some of the most important truths can only be 'felt' through the heart. Sometimes, when I'm typing an essay about spirituality, words would type themselves, as if they come from a deeper source of wisdom. As an engineering student, I strongly believe that my intuitive process has enriched my understanding of this world. Sometimes, I can learn more about this world when I close my eyes and pay attention to my consciousness than when I read a textbook. The wisdom that can be gained by being with the present moment is awe-inspiring, and it will always remain that way. I think we ought to seek wisdom, along with progress, with both our hearts and brains, so we can restore the harmony in our world.

I used to be angry at how deeply troubled this world, and my life, is. I used to feel that both my fights, to create a sustainable world and to seek inner peace, seem futile. Now, I know that I was wrong. I used to be so focused on some faraway end goal, but happiness and peace is not in the future; it is right here, and right now. Every moment in life can be a spiritual practice. Even when I play tennis, when I argue with a customer service operator, or when I am talking to a friend, there are spiritual lessons to be learned. As I continue to become aware of my ego's presence, I am determined to restart my meditation practice that I used to do when I was a novice monk. I am hopeful that, whatever plans God has for me, I am able to connect with Him and His plans on a deeper level. I shall continue along on my path of limitless opportunities – towards peace, wisdom, and compassion.

So why is life a privilege?

It's because we're here right now, being fully alive and present in the moment, awaiting more of those little deaths and small miracles that connect us to the essence of our being.

Just let go, and let God.